Discussing Death with Children

Death is a subject frequently avoided by many adults. Parents often wait until a close friend or family member dies before explaining death to their children. Below are several ideas to help parents appropriately discuss death with their children. If parents discuss death when children raise the issue of death, or other natural opportunities arise, children will develop a healthier understanding of death and will be better prepared when a death occurs among family or friends.

Death is a part of life, and children, to one degree or another, are aware of it. At early ages they encounter dead insects, birds, or animals killed in roadside accidents. Many young children will experience the deaths of treasured pets or close family members such as grandparents. Through such encounters, children will develop ideas about death. The ideas they develop may be accurate or inaccurate, healthy or unhealthy, but nonetheless, they will develop.

Children's understanding of death usually develops with only minimal adult guidance. For many adults, death is an undiscussed subject. Although death is a natural phenomenon, it has been treated as a taboo for much of the past century. However, avoiding the subject of death comes at an emotional cost to adults and children.

Helping children understand death is an important part of helping them understand life. As children discover the cycles of life and death in nature, they will begin to realize that death is as natural as birth. It is difficult to truly celebrate life if we ignore death. There are several things to remember as you explain death to children.

Speak in concrete terms. Children think concretely. They are not interested in abstract philosophical explanations. Give specific explanations with an appropriate amount of detail. Say, for example, "Grandpa has died. When people die they do not eat, do not breathe, and do not sleep." may be more understandable and helpful than to say "Death is when your spirit goes to heaven." Children better understand and receive more comfort from concrete factual explanations of death.

Euphemisms have their place, but it usually is not with children. It is important to use factual words such as "dead" or "died" rather than "passed on," or "left us." To say someone has gone "to sleep" or to their "final rest" ignores children's desire for concrete explanations. For younger children, this choice of wording may be misleading and result in unintended, mistaken, impressions and beliefs.

Use small deaths as opportunities to discuss death. It is usually easier to talk about death when we are less emotionally involved. The death of pets, flowers, or birds can provide good opportunities for discussing death. Taking advantage of these opportunities will make the death of a loved one easier to understand and cope with.

Share your religious beliefs. Religious beliefs can provide the anchor necessary to ride through the turbulent times surrounding a death. When parents share their beliefs and assurances, children take comfort in the faith and confidence demonstrated by their parents' beliefs. When sharing beliefs, parents should remember that children do not think like adults.

Sometimes, religious explanations can be frightening or misunderstood by children. For example, telling children that "God took Grandpa because he needed him" may cause a child to resent God. After all, the child needs him too. And if God took Grandpa because "he was so good," perhaps a child may think it unwise to be good. In contrast, telling a child that Grandpa is safe and that God will take care of him may be very reassuring to that child.

Some religious concepts are too abstract and difficult for young children to fully understand. For example, the concept of a "soul" is very difficult for many young children to understand. However, even though children may not fully understand religious beliefs, they can still receive comfort through the confidence they have in their parents' understanding. Parents should share religious beliefs, but should listen carefully for possible misinterpretations.

Reassure children of their own safety. Children are very concerned about their own safety. When a parent dies, it is important that children understand that they will be taken care of. In their innocent minds, they may be wondering how a four-year-old is going to take care of him or herself.

Death from tragedy and sickness can also create concerns for children. When a death occurs under tragic circumstances, children may be worried that a tragedy will kill them also. When death results from sickness, children may become overly concerned about their own minor illnesses. A simple cold may generate fear for a child whose grandmother died of an extended illness. Children need reassurance. Explaining that grandma had a very serious illness and that her body was worn out might help a child see the difference between their illness and a life-threatening illness.

Share feeling words. When it comes to "feeling words" children have a limited vocabulary. A death may bring on feelings they have not previously experienced. It is helpful for parents to use and explain feeling words. Children should have labels for feelings and know that such feelings are normal. Children may not understand feelings of anger directed toward the deceased. They may be equally confused by their frequent shift from one feeling to another. Telling children that "Sometimes when someone dies, we feel angry or sad or lonely or afraid" can help children understand that such feelings are normal. Parents should help children understand that feelings associated with the death of a loved one can change unexpectedly. Inviting your child to talk with you about his or her feelings will be helpful to both you and your child.

Help remove guilt. Children often assume that they are at the center of everything. As a result, children frequently think they were somehow responsible for the death. They may feel they were deserted by the deceased because they did something bad. In an angered movement they may have said, "I wish you were dead" And in their minds, the words made it happen. Parents should assure children that they are not responsible for a death; they should be sensitive to signs of guilt.

Well-meaning adults often tell children directly or indirectly that they should fill in the gap left by the deceased. Such responsibility is a heavy and inappropriate burden for children. They are probably not ready to be the "man of the house" or look after a bereft parent.

Check children's interpretation of the discussion frequently. When discussing death, parents must be sensitive to the child's interpretation of things. They may have a completely different interpretation of a discussion than parents had intended. By asking them to convey their understanding, parents not only see the accuracy of their interpretation, but also receive guidance to continue the discussion. Listen carefully. Children think in a unique way and live in their own world. Only by understanding their world can we effectively build bridges to our own world. If we listen to our children, they will reveal the difficulties they are having. Their misconceptions will surface and, in time, an accurate and healthy understanding of death can develop.

Invite children to discuss death and its meaning any time they feel a need. An understanding of death will not develop with a single discussion. With each additional discussion about death, children's understanding of death will increase and their questions will change to reflect new concerns.

Don't assume that one good discussion about death is all that's necessary. There are many levels to understanding death. The concerns of young children will be vastly different from the concerns of older children. Being sensitive to our children's concerns about death will provide children with the information they need at the time they need it. Understanding death can enrich our appreciation of life.